

12.2019

MORE TIGERS LIVE  
IN U.S. CAPTIVITY  
THAN IN THE WILD

THE STORY OF  
PLASTIC: BREAKING  
THE HABIT

YOU'VE NEVER SEEN  
A SHARK WITH  
TEETH LIKE THIS

# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

## UNDER JERUSALEM

NEW EXCAVATIONS REVEAL THE ANCIENT CITY  
—AND STOKES MODERN TENSIONS

*"Archaeology in  
Jerusalem is so sensitive  
that it touches not just  
the research community  
but politicians."*

YUVAL BARUCH  
ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES  
AUTHORITY



TIGERS ARE IN ROADSIDE ZOOS,

TIGERS ARE FREQUENTLY ABUSED,

AND CAPTIVE BIG CATS

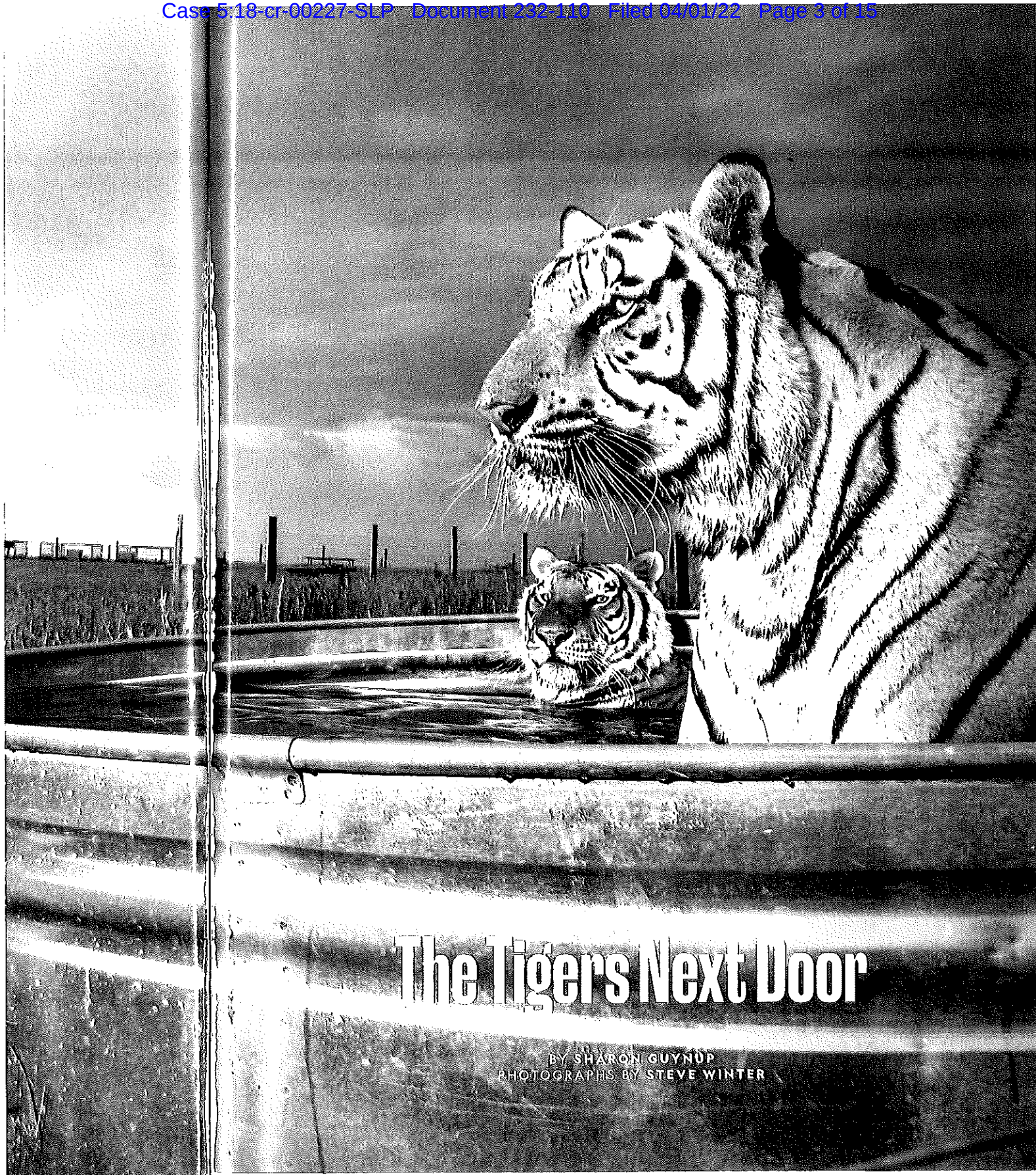
ARE LOSING OUTNUMBER TIGERS IN THE WILD,

ENDANGERED ANIMALS AND HUMANS

AT RISK.









**WILDLIFE WATCH**

# We heard them before we saw them.

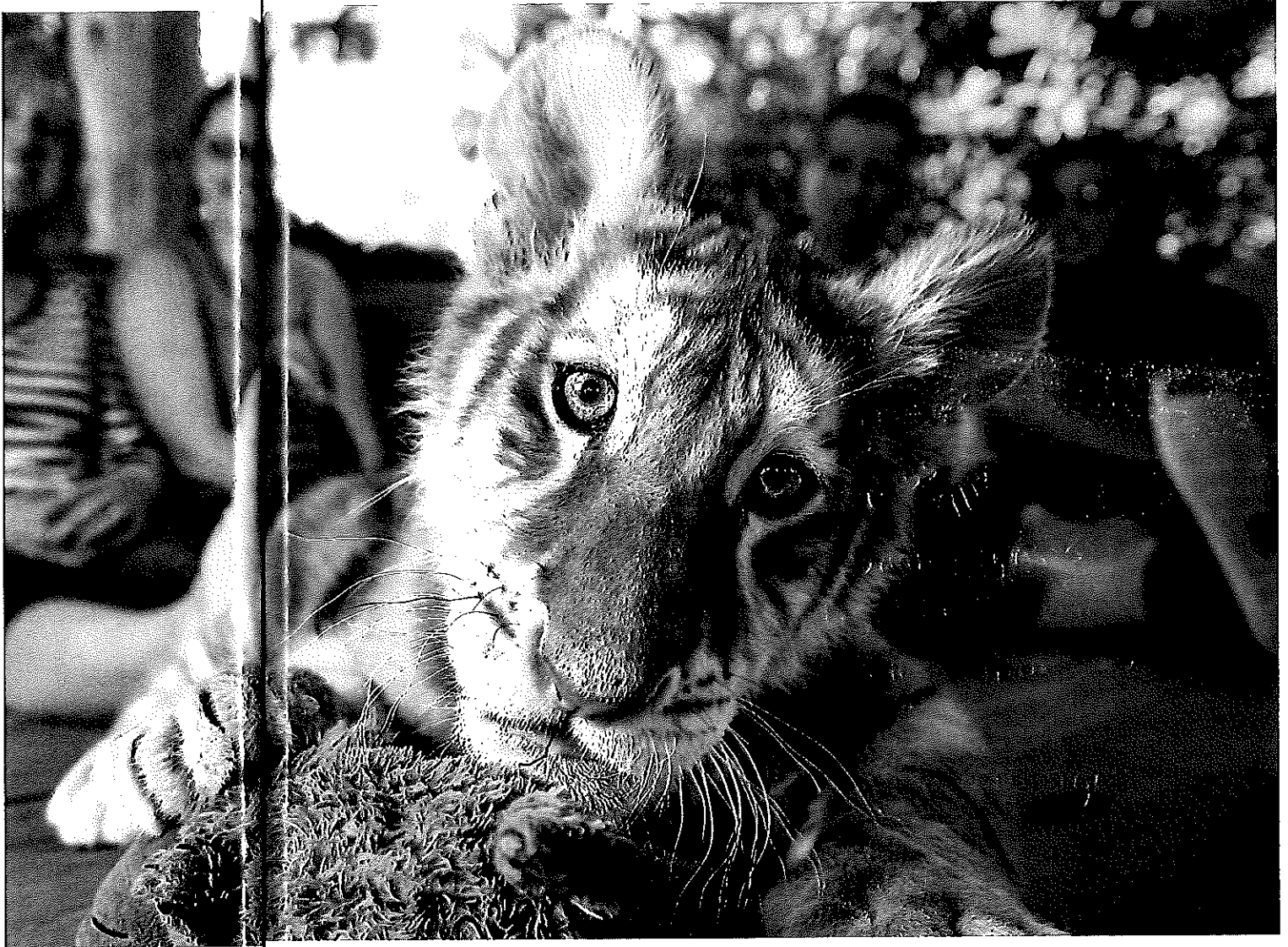
Their squawks echoed from inside the neat, ranch-style home, sounding more like parrots than tiger cubs. Then James Garretson carried Hulk into the living room, where the McCabe family waited on the couch. The kids giggled as he placed the squirming cub on nine-year-old Ariel's lap and pushed a baby bottle into its mouth. "Hold the bottle, just like that. You got it?" She nodded.

Everyone beamed, fondling Hulk's rough, striped fur as Garretson hovered nearby. The 12-week-old, cocker spaniel-size cat clutched the bottle in his oversize paws, sucking with wild enthusiasm. When the bottle was empty, the cub wandered onto the coffee table and swatted our photo gear.

Garretson lured him back with another bottle



Tourists watch a tiger cub play with a stuffed toy during a petting and photo opportunity at Myrtle Beach Safari. Visitors may be unaware of the breeding practices necessary to create these cubs—or what happens to many captive tigers when they become too big to interact with the public and can't be used for breeding or display as adults.



to give Ariel's five-year-old brother, James, a turn. Then the rambunctious cub leaped off the sofa, grabbed me from behind, gripped my legs with surprising strength, and tore five-inch scratches into my thighs. He sank his claws in and held on. Garretson peeled him off, and all made light of it with nervous laughs. Playful. Just acting like a kitten.

We met two more tiger cubs in a back room at the Ringling Animal Care Center in Oklahoma (which has no connection to the famous circus). Outside, we watched six adult tigers lounge in their pools or stalk one another, overweight but seemingly happy and living in clean enclosures.

That was in September 2018.

I later learned that seven tigers under Garretson's care at another facility had killed a

woman in 2003. Court documents noted the cats were "extraordinarily hungry" and had reached through flimsy cattle fencing to rip Lynda Brackett's arm off "in a feeding-like frenzy." The 35-year-old, who worked there as a volunteer, bled to death. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) fined Garretson \$32,560 and ordered him to never again exhibit, breed, buy, or sell animals that required U.S. federal licensing—including tigers. But by 2017 he was working at the Ringling center with new cats. The center was operating under a USDA license held by his girlfriend, Brittany Medina.

Four months after my visit, Garretson was

The nonprofit National Geographic Society, working to conserve Earth's resources, helped fund this article.



evicted from the property, which was leased in his name. A team from Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge drove from Arkansas to rescue the six adult tigers. One, named Diesel, was too ill to stand. He died four days later of a treatable bacterial blood infection thought to be carried by fleas and ticks, says veterinarian Kellyn Sweeley, who treated him. Hulk and the two other cubs had disappeared.

My visit to the Ringling center with photographer Steve Winter was just one stop during a two-year investigation into why there are likely more tigers living in cages in the U.S. than remain in the wild. We wanted to find out who owned them, what their living conditions are, how lax regulation has allowed them to proliferate, and how they're traded around the country.

Among other things, we found that most tigers in this country live in small zoos and animal

government officials, knows exactly how many there are, and there is no overarching federal law regulating big cat ownership.

Barylak showed a multicolored map illustrating a random patchwork of state laws. Some states ban private ownership. Others require a permit. Four have no statewide laws at all. In some places, it's easier to buy a tiger than to adopt a kitten from a local animal shelter.

You can get a USDA license to exhibit or breed gerbils—and then exhibit or breed any animal you want, including big cats. Entertainment drives the breeding and trading of tigers in the U.S., specifically attractions that allow customers to pet, feed, and pose with tiger cubs. Commercial breeders provide a constant supply of babies. Within some states, such commercial activities are legal if properly licensed by the USDA, which is tasked with enforcing minimum care standards

for animals under the Animal Welfare Act. But we found mistreatment of animals and a range of illicit activities, including illegal wildlife trafficking, at many facilities we visited.

Tiger cubs are a gold mine, especially white ones. Tourists hug, bottle-feed, and snap pictures with adorable babies at roadside zoos, county fairs, and safari parks. A quick photo op or five-minute cuddle runs \$10 to \$100. A three-hour zoo tour with cub handling

can run \$700 a person. Guests often are told they're helping to save wild tigers. They leave happy and post selfies on social media.

What they don't know is the cubs' history or future. Most are born in tiger mills where females churn out two or three litters a year, compared with one litter every two years in the wild. Cubs are pulled from their mothers soon after birth, says Jennifer Conrad, a veterinarian with expertise in tigers. Many are poorly fed; unknown numbers die. Some are sold off before their eyes open.

When they're just a few weeks old, the cubs go to work, sometimes passed around for up to 10 hours a day. The profits can be enormous. (Tax records from Wildlife in Need, an Indiana roadside zoo run by Tim Stark, showed annual revenue of \$1 million to \$1.27 million in recent years. Stark, who still runs the facility but is under a court order not to allow cub petting, has been cited repeatedly by the USDA for violations related to sick or injured animals and was convicted of illegal wildlife trafficking in 2008.)

## SMALL ATTRACTIONS

THAT OFFER VISITORS A CHANCE

TO PET TIGER CUBS FOR PHOTO OPS

## FEED A CYCLE OF ABUSE

IN WHICH CUBS ARE DISCARDED

WHEN THEY'RE NO LONGER USEFUL.

attractions—known generally in the industry as “roadside” zoos—where care standards can vary widely, in some cases endangering the animals in them and the humans who visit them.

**TIGERS ARE IN CRISIS.** At the turn of the 20th century, when Rudyard Kipling penned *The Jungle Book*, about 100,000 of the majestic cats roamed across Asia. They were wiped out by trophy hunts in India, the 1960s fashion craze for fur in the United States and Europe, the cats' shrinking habitat, conflicts with people, and poaching. Today perhaps 3,900 remain in the wild. Tigers hover closer to extinction than any other big cat.

After years of reporting on the illegal wildlife trade in Asia, I decided to look into tigers in America when I heard a talk by Carson Barylak, a policy specialist with the International Fund for Animal Welfare.

She said there may be 5,000 to 10,000 captive tigers in the United States. No one, including

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At three or four months, cubs reach what amounts to their expiration date: They're too big and dangerous to pet.

Some cubs become breeders or are put on display. Others simply disappear. Cub petting for photo opportunities "fuels a rapid and vicious cycle of breeding and dumping cubs after they outgrow their usefulness," said Representative Brian Fitzpatrick, a Republican from Pennsylvania. He and Mike Quigley, a Democrat from Illinois, co-sponsored the Big Cat Public Safety Act, a bill in the House of Representatives that aims to better protect animals and the public by prohibiting commercial breeding, public handling, and ownership of big cats as pets. The bill was introduced in the Senate recently by Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat from Connecticut.

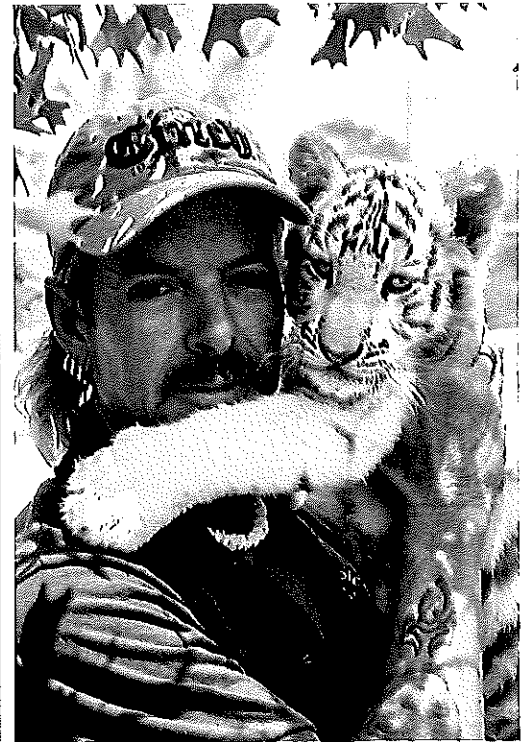
There's evidence that some surplus tigers are killed to reduce inventory at roadside zoos and similar attractions. Dead tigers have been stuffed or sold off in parts: skins, teeth, claws, and skeletons. It's illegal to sell or ship them for purely commercial purposes across state lines under the Endangered Species Act.

Tentacles of this U.S. trafficking network have reached into Asia. In a recent case, a New York City man, Arongkron "Paul" Malasukum, was convicted of illegal wildlife trafficking for selling lion and tiger parts. As part of his plea, he admitted to shipping 68 packages of wildlife parts falsely labeled as ceramics and toys to Thailand. Court papers listed items seized from his home, including tiger skulls, teeth, and claws, as well as elephant tusks.

Captive-bred cats in Asia have fed a deadly commerce in tiger products for decades, stimulating demand that drives poaching, says Debbie Banks, a tiger trafficking expert with the U.K.-based Environmental Investigation Agency.

China is the largest consumer. Its market in tiger parts for luxury items and for use in traditional medicine drives this deadly trade. The country's tiger attractions, home to some 6,000 tigers, often double as "farms" that breed the animals to sell their parts.

**W**E WANTED TO SEE tigers in other situations, so we headed to Pennsylvania to meet Brunon Blaszk. He's a third-generation tiger trainer who tours with one of the country's few tiger acts. We watched him put his five tigers through traditional circus tricks in a



Joseph Maldonado-Passage, known as Joe Exotic, poses with Lightning, a four-month-old white cub, at G.W. Exotic Animal Park in Oklahoma. Once a prolific breeder and

dealer of tigers and hybrids, he is in prison after being convicted in April on two counts of murder for hire and 17 federal wildlife charges—including killing five tigers.

rustic, portable enclosure at the Fayette County Fair. It was July, and brutally hot. During our two-plus days at the fair, the cats spent much of their time in five-by-eight-foot travel cages.

We also met people who kept tigers as pets; some seemed to truly love them. One, Oklahoma exotic animal owner Lori Ensign-Scroggins, seemed oblivious to the potential danger of keeping such a large predator. She walked Langley, her nearly 300-pound ti-liger (a cross between a tiger and a lion-tiger mix), on a leash and sometimes took him into her home. She called him "Baby" and gave him special care, saying he'd been a cub-petting castoff. Langley had vision problems and walked with a rolling limp, problems most likely caused by hybridization.

In our travels we saw cats kept under conditions that ran the gamut. We saw cats pacing the perimeters of dirty, prison-like cages as well as calm cats in large, lush habitats. Some were beautiful and well cared for. Others bore

scars, were skinny or fat, were listless or covered in open sores. Some displayed symptoms of inbreeding or poor nutrition and were crippled, cross-eyed, or deformed. None seemed to be the confident, wide-ranging predator that *Panthera tigris* evolved to be.

Highly regarded zoos, aquariums, and animal parks—236 facilities—are accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), which does not allow public contact with tigers. The AZA—whose members include facilities owned by The Walt Disney Company, the parent company of National Geographic Partners—also allows only purebred tigers to be bred, and only for conservation purposes. Wildlife specialists say that such policies reflect some of the improvements in the care of exotic animals that have unfolded over the past three decades, as saving species and showing animals in more

food or fiber” must have a USDA license. Some captive-wildlife experts, including Cathy Liss, president of the nonprofit Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), say that recently the USDA hasn’t done enough to ensure animals’ safety. Liss questions why the department has gutted enforcement of the Animal Welfare Act, noting that the law’s care and safety rules “are so modest that if you can’t meet them, you shouldn’t be in business.”

From 2016 to 2018, new investigations into captive-animal welfare and safety issues dropped by 92 percent, from 239 to just 19. The department also wrote far fewer citations, issuing 1,716 in 2018, compared with 4,944 two years before—a 65 percent drop, according to AWI.

In June the U.S. House of Representatives reprimanded the USDA for substituting “teachable moment” conversations for active enforcement, noting concern over “how the Animal Care program is being managed.” It ordered the USDA to “immediately require all its inspectors to cite every observed violation at any visit to a regulated entity.”

Congress told the USDA to reinstate information that had been scrubbed from its website in 2017, which had made it impossible to monitor problem facilities for neglect, abuse, or safety issues that endanger animals and the public. The department later restored some information, but the

reports are heavily redacted. I asked the USDA about this and other issues: Problems counting and tracking tigers; the welfare of cubs that are handled by the public; why venues with decades of serious violations are still licensed; and more. After repeated requests for an interview and a series of email exchanges, the USDA provided a written reply that broadly quoted regulations and offered web links, but gave few specifics. The department refused my request for an interview and declined to make someone available to address questions.

**THE NEXT TIME** I saw James Garretson, he was on the witness stand in a federal court in Oklahoma City.

It was March 2019, and he was testifying against “Joe Exotic,” a man who owned what prosecutor Amanda Green said was “quite possibly the largest population of big cats in captivity in the U.S.”

His real name is Joseph Maldonado-Passage,

## SOME OF THE TIGERS

WE SAW LOOKED BEAUTIFUL

AND WELL CARED FOR.

OTHERS BORE SCARS,

APPEARED TOO SKINNY OR FAT,

OR WERE LISTLESS OR COVERED IN SORES.

natural habitats have become priorities.

Attractions that breed tigers for commercial purposes, allow cub petting, or both—including some of the roadside zoos and parks we visited—often are not accredited by any organization that sets specific guidelines for exotic animals. Some belong to the Zoological Association of America (ZAA), a trade association that allows cub petting.

**M**ANY **ROADSIDE ZOOS** brand themselves as sanctuaries, but few meet the criteria for them, says Bobbi Brink, director of Lions Tigers & Bears, an exotic animal rescue and sanctuary in San Diego. These standards, she says, include no breeding, buying, or selling of animals; prohibiting the public from hands-on contact with them; and providing proper nutrition, care, and a lifetime home.

Facilities that exhibit, breed, or deal in captive exotic “warm-blooded animals not raised for



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and he'd been indicted on 19 wildlife charges  
 and two counts of murder for hire. Garretson  
 had known him for decades and bought cats  
 from him. He'd taped their conversations and  
 collected text messages that became key evi-  
 dence in a trial that revealed widespread criminal  
 activity in the U.S. tiger industry.

This was the first time I'd seen Joe Exotic,  
 though I felt like I knew him. I'd followed five of  
 his Facebook pages for more than a year. I'd seen  
 many online videos, interviews, and episodes  
 of *Joe Exotic TV*, the low-budget online reality  
 show he streamed from his parents' Oklahoma  
 zoo, G.W. Exotic Animal Park, which opened in  
 1999. At one time, he claimed to own 227 tigers.

Joe Exotic is a showman who loves to talk and  
 craves the spotlight. At 56, he sports a signature  
 horseshoe mustache and dyed-blond mullet.  
 He's inked in tattoos depicting tigers, past lovers,  
 and bullet holes dripping blood.

He once ran cub-petting photo sessions in  
 shopping malls, parking lots, and county fairs  
 across the West and Midwest. He staged rudimentary  
 magic shows with tigers as "the Tiger King,"  
 dressed as an open-shirted, Las Vegas-  
 style entertainer. He ran for president in 2016,  
 garnering 962 votes, and for Oklahoma governor  
 in 2018, when he got 664.

Back home, Joe Exotic was a prolific tiger  
 breeder and dealer. Prosecutors said he falsified  
 tiger birth records that he showed to USDA  
 inspectors to hide the birth and sale of cubs.

Joe Exotic's house was a tiger day care center,  
 said his niece, Chealsi Putman, who worked at the  
 zoo. The living room was sometimes crammed  
 with six or seven playpens for litters of cubs.

He bred white tigers, which often are inbred.  
 They were among the most popular, drawing  
 huge crowds to the zoo. He took greatest pride  
 in breeding tigers with lions, "chimera" hybrids  
 that don't exist in nature: ligers (lion dad, tiger  
 mom), tigons (the reverse)—and then li-ligers,  
 ti-ligers, and more.

His troubles began soon after the zoo opened  
 two decades ago. The USDA cited him repeatedly  
 for violations of Animal Welfare Act standards:  
 Inspectors documented sick, injured, mistreated  
 animals and unclear, unsafe enclosures contaminated  
 by vermin. The agency fined him \$25,000  
 in 2006. Major problems continued: an escaped  
 tiger, a mauled employee, at least 22 cubs that  
 died over an eight- to 10-month period.

Then in 2011 came protests over his mall shows,

sparked by Carole Baskin, founder of Big Cat Rescue  
 sanctuary in Florida. She'd launched 911 Animal  
 Abuse, a website that exposes mistreatment  
 of big cats and opposes separating cubs from their  
 mothers to use the babies as photo props.

Mall chains stopped hiring Joe Exotic. He  
 threatened Baskin on social media and sparked  
 hate fests on Facebook against her and others  
 he called "animal rights terrorists." He retaliated  
 by renaming his road show Big Cat Rescue  
 Entertainment, even copying the sanctuary's  
 logo. Baskin then sued over intellectual property  
 rights and won a million dollars in settlements  
 in 2013. It financially devastated Joe Exotic, who  
 took on a business partner to help pay the bills.

Joe Exotic told anyone who'd listen that he  
 wanted Baskin dead. In a YouTube video, he  
 said, "Carole Baskin better never, ever, ever see  
 me face-to-face, ever, ever, ever again." Then he  
 blew the head off an effigy of her with a revolver.

The conflict grew more serious in 2016, Garretson  
 testified, when Joe Exotic "asked if I knew  
 somebody that would kill" Baskin and said he'd  
 offer \$10,000 to anyone who would agree to do it.

Some months later, Garretson said, Joe Exotic  
 mentioned that he'd shot some of his own tigers.  
 Garretson decided that was enough. He'd been  
 contacted by Matt Bryant, a special agent at the  
 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and he signed on  
 as a government informant. Court documents  
 say Garretson collected tapes and texts as Joe  
 Exotic hired an employee, Allen Glover, to kill  
 Baskin and then sold a cub to pay for a \$3,000  
 deposit on the hit.

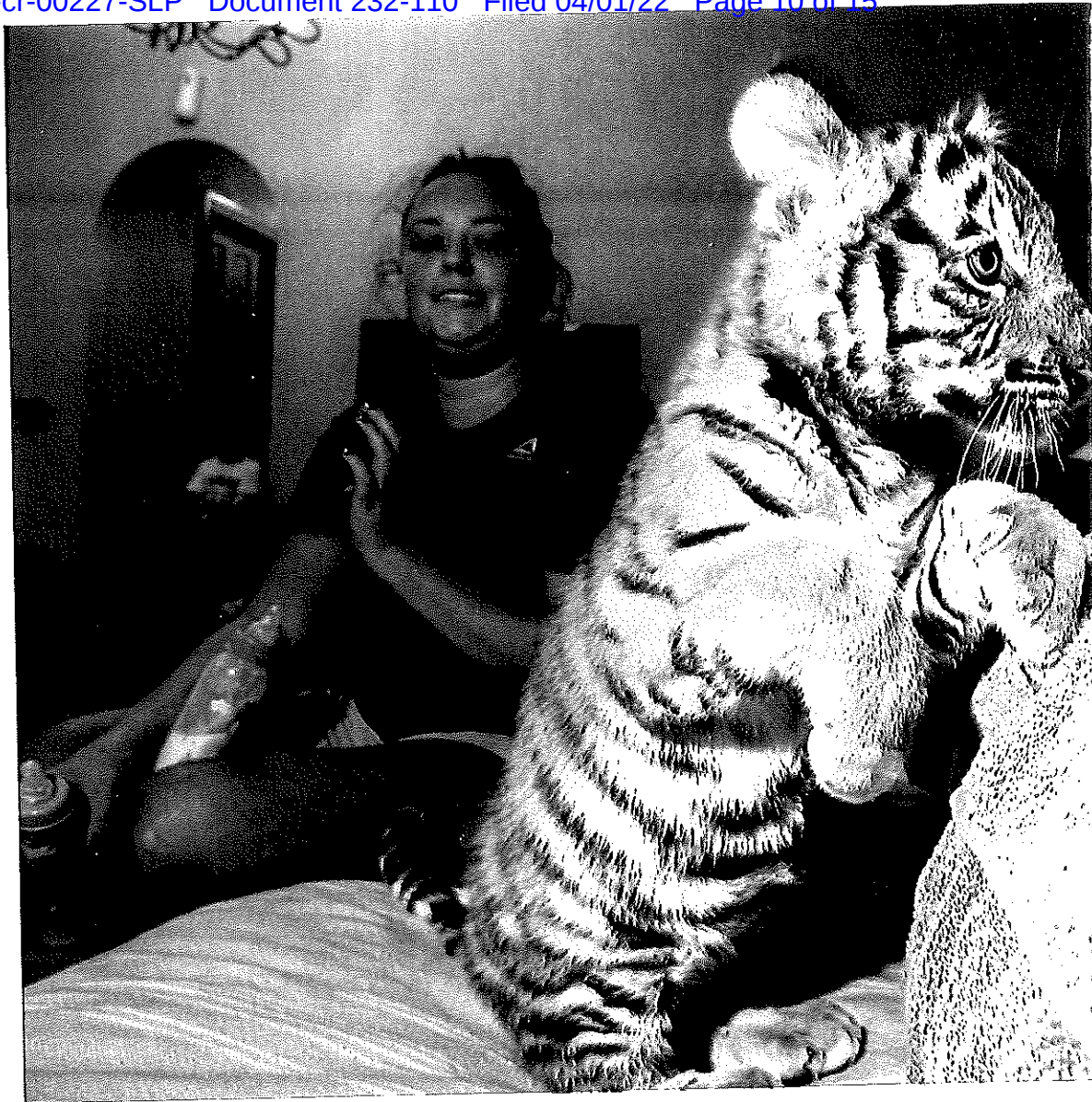
When Glover disappeared with the money, Joe  
 Exotic tried again. This time, the would-be hit  
 man was an undercover FBI agent.

Joe Exotic was arrested on two counts of  
 murder for hire in September 2018. Federal wild-  
 life charges were added later; those included  
 illegally selling and transporting endangered  
 species across state lines, falsely labeling those  
 sales as "donations," and killing five tigers.

**IN COURT**, Glover's testimony raised shivers.  
 He testified that he'd told Joe Exotic that  
 he would cut off Baskin's head with a knife.  
 (Glover was never charged.)

Baskin wasn't physically harmed, but  
 tigers were. Under oath, former zoo employ-  
 ees Dylan West and Eric Cowie described what  
 happened in October 2017. After tranquilizing  
 five tigers, Joe Exotic "walked up to them with





the .410 [shotgun] and put it against their head[s] and pulled the trigger," West said. Cowie testified that the victims, named Samson, Delilah, Lauren, Trinity, and Cuddles, were "dispensable" because they weren't producing cubs.

Special Agent James Markley described what Fish and Wildlife investigators unearthed a year later. Digging down five feet, "we found five tigers lined up, side by side, like hot dogs in a pack."

In April the jury convicted Joe Exotic on 17 wildlife charges (two were dropped) and the murder-for-hire counts, both felonies. He faces up to 69 years in prison.

Under the Endangered Species Act, killing tigers is a misdemeanor. Joe Exotic insisted that the law was written to apply to wild animals, not

those born in a zoo. In a recent email, he said he had a right to "euthanize my own property."

Environmental crimes prosecutor John Webb characterized it differently. "It was tiger execution," he said. It wasn't the first.

In 2003 Illinois corrections officer William Kapp was convicted for his role in shooting 18 tigers and leopards in their cages and brokering the sale of their meat and skins to buyers. The same year, California Department of Fish and Wildlife investigators found 90-some dead animals—mostly tigers, including 58 cubs—in a freezer when they raided the home of John Weinhart, owner of Tiger Rescue, a facility in Colton, California, that billed itself as a sanctuary for animals that had worked in the entertainment industry.





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Brittany Medina  
watches 12-week-old  
Hulk jump around  
her living room while  
waiting for the next  
cub-petting clients at  
Ringling Animal Care  
Center in Oklahoma  
in 2018. When the  
operation closed last  
January, six adult tigers  
were rescued by  
Turpentine Creek  
Wildlife Refuge.

In emails from jail, Joe Exotic questioned why other breeders have not been charged, alleging that they have sold, illegally transported, or killed big cats—and continue to.

So, he asked, “why am I the only one in jail?”

**T**HE UNITED STATES has been a leader in the fight against the illegal wildlife trade, a business involving international crime syndicates that analysts say could amount to as much as \$20 billion a year.

In 2015 the U.S. and China negotiated a near-total bilateral ban on ivory sales.

But the U.S. has less credibility when it comes to protecting tigers because of its large, poorly regulated population of captive tigers. Breeding these animals for “trade in parts and derivatives” was outlawed in a 2007 decision by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), a treaty signed by 183 members worldwide, including the United States. Now CITES is investigating seven nations linked to possible trafficking of captive-bred tigers: the U.S., China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, the Czech Republic, and South Africa.

Fish and Wildlife special agent Phillip Land told me that “exporting wildlife out of the United States is becoming more prevalent.” A State Department email to congressional staff last year noted that private ownership of tigers in the U.S. is “inconsistent with our stance against tiger farming and trafficking.”

One U.S. official told me he was laughed at by Chinese delegates at a CITES meeting when he raised a question about China’s tiger farms. He said one of the delegates told him, “At least we know how many tigers we have.”

**P**HILIP NYHUS, a professor at Maine’s Colby College, traces the massive striped cat’s arrival in the United States to the early 1800s. Crowds flocked to see exotic animals from far-flung lands in traveling menageries.

By 1833 animal trainer Isaac van Amburgh was using tigers in his act, climbing into their cages dressed as a gladiator. He was criticized for his brutality; he was said to have beaten his tigers with a crowbar. Such dominance training helped embed a notion in the American psyche, Nyhus says, that these dangerous beasts must be subdued by macho trainers.

When the nation’s first zoo opened in





Philadelphia in 1874, it exhibited a tiger, as did many of the hundred-plus “zoological parks” and 650 circuses that sprouted nationwide during the next half century.

Fast-forward to 1960. Billionaire John Kluge bought a white Bengal tiger, Mohini, from India’s maharaja of Rewa and donated it to the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. The female had ice-blue eyes, a pink nose, and milky fur slashed by dark stripes. She was one of only seven in the world, all in captivity.

Mohini wasn’t an albino or a separate subspecies. Her snowy coat came from a pair of recessive genes, one from each parent. Breeding with her half brother produced the first white cub in the U.S. in 1964. The Cincinnati Zoo borrowed two of her children, which also were bred to one

another. This was the start of a practice that eventually produced 91 white cubs from 1974 to 1990. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that the zoo sold the cubs for \$40,000 to \$60,000 each.

The Cincinnati Zoo, which is accredited by the AZA, stopped breeding white tigers after 1990. In 2012 the AZA banned the practice for its affiliates. Both did so because of numerous health problems in inbred cats and because breeding for white tigers had no conservation value.

“The days of breeding white tigers in accredited zoos are over,” says Thane Maynard, director of the Cincinnati Zoo. AZA president Dan Ashe, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service from 2011 to 2017, says breeding for recessive traits “is simply unethical from the standpoint of the welfare of the population and of the individual animal.”



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Terry's Taxidermy  
stuffed and displayed  
these two tigers. The  
owner, Terry Mayberry,  
says he acquired them  
from an Oklahoma ani-  
mal park. Because both  
businesses are in the  
same state—and the  
animals were not trans-  
ported across state  
lines—this exchange  
was not prohibited  
by the Endangered  
Species Act.

Descendants of the early white tigers began appearing in attractions across the U.S.: Siegfried Fischbacher and Uwe Ludwig Horn bought seven whites from Cincinnati and began putting them in their "Siegfried & Roy" magic show, which dazzled Las Vegas audiences for decades and grossed up to \$45 million a year. The spectacle included Roy dancing with a 400-pound cat. The show ended in 2003 when a tiger mauled him onstage.

By then America had fallen in love with tigers, and they were everywhere. In 1998 Fish and Wildlife limited its captive-wildlife registration requirements to purebreds. That meant anyone could buy, breed, and sell "mutt" Bengal-Siberian or other generic mixes across state lines without a permit. It "incentivized mass breeding," says Carney Anne Nasser, a captive-tiger expert and professor at Michigan State University.

You could pet a cub at a flea market, a county fair, a mall. Tigers lived in people's homes, garages, and flimsy cages in backyards.

But when those adorable cubs grew, they tore up the furniture and attacked the kids. Many owners couldn't handle a dangerous 300- to 450-pound carnivore or the \$10,000-a-year food and vet bills that came with it. The first havens for these cast-off big cats are still open today: Baskin's Big Cat Rescue in Florida, Pat Craig's Wild Animal Sanctuary in Colorado, and Scott and Tanya Smith's Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge in Arkansas. All are accredited by the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries. Craig is building a facility that will allow cats to roam in 35- to 500-acre habitats.

**I**N FEBRUARY 2017 we followed the Smiths on a caravan-style drive from Colorado to California. Four tigers were in the trailer they pulled behind them, the last of 74 from Serenity Springs Wildlife Center in Calhan, Colorado. They were relocated to 15 sanctuaries in a six-month marathon—the largest tiger rescue in U.S. history. The former owner, Nick Sculac, had sold Serenity Springs, citing health problems. Records left behind in his office revealed that he'd been among America's biggest tiger breeders. The USDA had filed complaints against him in 2012 and 2015, detailing animal abuse, neglect, and safety violations. He lost his exhibitor's license in April 2017, eight months after he sold the facility.

The Smiths said the conditions at Serenity



Springs were “a horror show.” The air was black with flies attracted by rotting garbage. Dead birds floated in animal pools. Enclosures were shin-deep in excrement. One tiger was missing a leg, possibly from fighting with a cage mate. Another had a softball-size tumor under its chin. Many had broken, abscessed teeth and limped from declawing; their claws had been removed by amputating the first joint of their toes.

Three four-month-old white cubs, Blackfire, Rocklyn, and Peyton, were in critical condition. They could barely drag themselves to their water bowls and cried when they moved. They were rushed to the Smiths’ Turpentine Creek sanctuary for emergency care. X-rays showed each had a malformed pelvis and misshapen, nearly transparent bones so riddled with fractures they resembled a mosaic. Pulled from their mother and poorly nourished, they’d developed

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metabolic bone disease, says Emily McCormack, the sanctuary’s animal curator. “Every day we asked each other, ‘Can we save them?’ ”

We traveled to Arkansas in September 2018 to see what had become of the cubs. Blackfire, the male, sauntered to the fence, chuffing a tiger hello. At two years old, he was magnificent. He and his sisters still limped, and McCormack said they’re on daily pain medication, but they chased and pounced like kittens in their large, grassy enclosure.

**T**IGERS ARE EXTREMELY dangerous and cannot be domesticated, says Tim Harrison, a retired police officer with expertise in exotic animals and public safety. A lot can go wrong with tigers in captivity, he says, if a hurricane or tornado hits, a fire breaks out, or humans simply make a mistake. Eight years ago, an incident in Zanesville, Ohio, showed what can happen when something goes horribly wrong with someone

who keeps wild predators. Exotic pet owner Terry Thompson apparently set 56 of his animals loose—including 38 big cats—then shot himself. Muskingum County sheriff Matthew Lutz and his deputies had to kill most of the animals to protect the community.

Edmund Kelso, Jr., a former FBI bomb expert, expressed his concern in a letter to Congress: “If I had a choice of working on an IED or responding to an emergency involving a dangerous big cat, I would definitely select the former. This should underscore how dangerous it truly is for these animals to be left in untrained hands in back yards and roadside zoos.”

There’s a long list of tragic stories involving people who have lost limbs or been bitten, mauled, or killed. Among them: Haley R. Hilderbrand, 17, who was killed while posing for her senior pictures with a male tiger in Kansas in 2005; and a three-year-old boy who was blinded by his father’s tiger in North Carolina in 1995.

The number of attacks is unknown: No government agency keeps records of them, and injuries often go unreported. Eight former roadside zoo employees who’d been bitten or clawed told me they’d been discouraged from seeing a doctor so no one would find out. They also said they’d received little or no training in handling big cats.

In 2012, seven nonprofits petitioned the USDA to ban public contact with dangerous wildlife at its licensed facilities, citing a “welfare and public safety crisis.” By law, the department must respond. But seven years later, it has “no projected date” for doing so, the USDA said in a written statement.

**I** SPENT TWO DAYS at Myrtle Beach Safari, a wildlife attraction in South Carolina.

Bhagavan “Doc” Antle, the owner, is known for producing white tigers. The park promotes itself on Instagram, where Antle’s son Kody posts pictures of himself shirtless, with his father’s animals and videos of their animals’ antics. He has more than a million followers.

In May I joined 79 people on a three-hour “wild encounters” tour. It began in a safari lodge-style living room. TVs played loops of Doc Antle’s appearances on *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*, as well as films and shows he’s

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trained animals for. (National Geographic has worked with Antle in the past but has decided it will no longer do so.)

The tour was highly scripted. Attractive young women enceed, peppering their circus-style oratory with puns. After a lively intro, staffer Robert Johnson outlined conservation programs funded by Antle's nonprofit, the Rare Species Fund (RSF). "You guys are part of it now. Congratulations!" he said.

He pointed to the windows behind the crowd. Outside, Kody walked a monstrous, 900-pound liger named Hercules on a chain, a tawny, lionish hybrid cat with faint stripes and a massive head. All took turns posing for photos in front of him. We walked through a manicured jungle setting to a large gazebo. Inside, guests played with tiger cubs as photographers snapped pictures. Everyone was smitten. Back in the lodge, visitors gushed as they waited for pictures. No cameras were allowed, so most bought a photo package. One visitor booked a swim-with-a-tiger session for \$5,000. After dark, nearly 30 joined a "night safari." I estimated the day's receipts at about \$50,000.

The tour gave customers the impression that it was all for conservation. The RSF supports some conservation projects, but staff wouldn't say how much the fund donates each year, and some of its activities have raised questions. Among them are "educational" tiger performances at Renaissance fairs, where Antle told me he'd sold about a million photo ops with adult tigers and ligers. Antle also has delivered tigers to Thailand's Samut Prakarn Crocodile Farm and Zoo; in June *National Geographic* published a story about animal abuse at that attraction.

The fund's website says it is "working to improve wildlife legislation." In the past decade, Antle's businesses have spent at least \$1.15 million lobbying on proposed regulations on captive wildlife and big cat issues—including \$60,000 to lobby against the Big Cat Public Safety Act.

The future of tigers in the U.S. remains to be seen. But this much is clear: As long as tourists seek to cuddle tiger cubs and be dazzled by hybrid cats—and as long as U.S. policies make owning dangerous cats so easy—the formula for abuse will remain in place. □

**Sharon Guynup** is a National Geographic explorer and a global fellow at the Wilson Center. She focuses on wildlife and trafficking. Photographer **Steve Winter** specializes in big cats.

## Some guidelines for seeing wild animals

Figuring out how to observe exotic animals humanely can be complicated and confusing. Watching them from a safe distance in the wild is ideal, animal welfare advocates say. To assess how facilities treat captive animals, you can refer to internationally recognized standards inspired by a 1965 U.K. government report. Known as the "five freedoms," they're used by animal welfare groups worldwide and by the U.S., Canadian, and European veterinary medical associations.

### 1 Freedom from hunger and thirst

Look for facilities where animals appear to be well-fed and have access to clean water at all times.

### 2 Freedom from discomfort

Observe whether animals have an appropriate environment, including shelter, ample space, a comfortable resting area, and a secluded place away from crowds.

### 3 Freedom from pain, injury, or disease

Avoid facilities where animals are visibly injured or are forced to participate in activities that could injure them or cause them pain—or where enclosures aren't clean.

### 4 Freedom to express normal behavior

Being chained, performing, and interacting with tourists—giving rides, posing with them, being washed by them—are not normal for a wild animal, even one born in captivity.

### 5 Freedom from fear and distress

Be aware that fear-based training, separation of babies from mothers at birth, unnatural noises, and large crowds cause distress.

To read more reporting about wildlife, visit [natgeo.com/wildlife-watch](http://natgeo.com/wildlife-watch).